

Literacy and Language Revitalization: Leaving a Visible Trace

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In response to external pressures such as colonization, globalization, and urbanization, many Indigenous communities around the world are experiencing threats to their languages (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998). These threats are being met with resistance, often in the form of language revitalization and reclamation initiatives, including school-based language learning and adult language programs (Gessner et al, 2014). The central research question of this paper is: what role does print literacy play in Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) efforts? I address this question through interviews with Indigenous language champions, as well as an extensive review of the literature, using research methods that reflect Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 1998; Kovach, 2006; Parker, 2012; Wilson, 2007). In this paper, I report on the results of a qualitative study that explores how language champions in Indigenous communities view print literacy, and their perspectives on what role literacy has in language revitalization initiatives. The literature review explores the complexity of literacy in Indigenous communities, including definitions of and assumptions about literacy, its historical and political aspects, and how it fits into discussions of decolonization and self-determination in Indigenous education (Battiste, 2013; De Korne, 2009; McCarty, 2005). Following McCarty (2005), I am able to show that in many communities, Indigenous literacies, including print literacy, are being used “as a means of opposing dominant discourses and asserting local educational and linguistic rights” (p. 47).

Print literacy has at times been both imposed upon (Matusov & St. Julien, 2004), and withheld from (Battiste, 1984) Indigenous communities. Binary distinctions between literate and nonliterate communities “intersect with ideologies of merit and privilege” (McCarty, 2005, p. xvii), and maintain power hierarchies, such as those between colonizer and colonized, by defining nonliterate language varieties in terms of deficiency. In the education-as-business model (Green, 2009), Indigenous languages are generally seen as neither profitable nor essential, and often communities are left with the task of developing language programs with little support from the government (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). Keeping in mind the complexities and implications of print literacy, this paper shows that, as Noori (2013) explains, “there is value in leaving a visible trace of the language in a world dominated by English” (p. 126).

Grenoble & Whaley (2005) discuss four different types of literacy, each of which is situated in a particular cultural context and which serves different purposes: functional literacy, social literacy, autonomous literacy, and local literacy. These categories encompass a variety of technical skills that might arise in local literacy practices. Therefore, print literacy, embedded in the cultural, political, and social contexts of a community, may also be considered a “local literacy.” As Hornberger (1997) explains, “literacy is not one uniform technical skill, but rather it is something which varies in each different context and society...[Local literacies...] refers to those literacy practices that are closely connected with local and regional identities” (p. 5).

Indigenous literacies hold great potential for “opposing dominant discourses and asserting local educational and linguistic rights” in Indigenous communities (McCarty, 2005, p. 47). Following Battiste’s (2013) discussion of educational reform and decolonization, this research has found that local literacies rooted in place, culture, and community, can be used to strengthen

Indigenous languages and reaffirm Indigenous identity. This paper concludes that print literacy in particular, as one type of literacy, can play a role in Indigenous language revitalization, as a way of reclaiming languages in Indigenous communities. Further, this paper concludes that, as illustrated by language revitalization initiatives in the SENĆOŦEN-speaking community, the visual representation of Indigenous languages can play an important role in self-determination (WSANEC School Board, 2017).

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